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THE OTHER SIDE

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In the November number of the *Forum* an article appeared entitled, "Wastes and Abuses of Our Educational System." The argument was directed against classical studies and pure mathematics, as important collegiate subjects. The superficial and off-hand manner in which the classics were bowed out of the halls of learning has prompted this answer.

Since the present writer is a specialist in classics, the objection may be raised that he is a special pleader. But who has the better claim to be heard on the question of the value of Latin and Greek, one who knows something of them or one who does not? In any event, the writer's vision is not limited to Greek particles and the Latin subjunctive. Unlike the economist of the *Forum* article, he has interests beyond his own specialty. For him, not language alone, but literature, history, economics, philosophy have a special appeal. He has no quarrel with any subjects on the college curriculum, except with those short cuts to knowledge which sophistically promise to give the student something for nothing.

Our criticism will be directed against the economist's argument in two main particulars: first, it is largely irrelevant, at least in this country; and, secondly, it is manifestly unfair, and reveals a strange ignorance of the subject with which it undertakes to deal.

1. Our economist fulminates against a situation that is practically no longer existent in America. The American classicist is very rare today who would insist that all college graduates should have pursued Latin or Greek, and the large majority of students, at least throughout the West, are not trained in either. The democratization of our high schools and colleges has made such an ideal impossible. The danger of anything approaching the old-time despotism of the classics in education is so remote as to be practically nil, and American classicists would be among the last

who would desire to go back to the old régime. Latin and Greek, especially the latter, are by no means everybody's affair, and no man understands that better than the trained classicist himself. Indeed, collegiate education is not everybody's affair. There are thousands of men and women in our colleges today who should be at some kind of productive work, for which they are fitted, or else in a trade school. Their college experience will result in little but a heritage of economic loss for society and of inefficiency and tragedy for themselves.

The classicist of today is not laying any claim to a "monopoly of educational values." He recognizes the vast broadening of the field of human knowledge and welcomes in the college curriculum all studies that require sufficient mental effort to warrant it. Indeed, judging by the spirit of the article in question, it comes much nearer to making such a claim for the social sciences.

Again, the "faculty psychology" is no longer a part of the classicist's stock in trade. He holds no special brief for the doctrine of formal discipline. He does, however, insist on discipline in education. He protests against much of the loose generalization that has been written by specialists in education on this subject. He still steadfastly believes that all languages and studies are not of the same educational value; that some are better adapted to train students to think than others; and that Latin and Greek are among such studies. He is not urging the pursuit of Latin and Greek as a "memory training," nor, indeed, for any end, primarily, extraneous to the studies themselves, but for the sake of their own content, because it is only through this medium that one can arrive at a satisfactory appreciation of these two masterly literatures and civilizations.

The educational conditions in America today certainly do not call for any "waste of energy" in decrying the despotism of the classical régime, for that régime is about as dead as feudalism. The situation calls rather for a warning against an utter loss of unifying aim and of real discipline, amid the multitudinous subjects of the present motley curriculum. It calls for an encouragement of the elect minority to dare to be unlike the crowd, and use their ability and ambition in securing for themselves a first-hand contact with

the master thinkers and stylists of two of the greatest civilizations of all time. The percentage of college students that are burdened by the alleged incubus of the classics today is ridiculously small, and these, very largely because of special ambition or ability, idealism, or a certain practical aim, have deliberately chosen their own fate. If our economist is so solicitous about the waste of mental energy, is it not about time that he ceased fuming over a situation which, if it ever existed, exists no longer?

2. But aside from the irrelevancy of much of his argument, his presentation of the case of classical studies is in many respects patently unfair. He employs that ancient sophistry, "dead languages," as if to settle the worth of Latin and Greek by an epithet. But let it be remembered that these languages still live in their immortal literature; that Latin still lives in English and the Romance languages; that Greek has had a continuous literary history for about twenty-eight hundred years and that it is still the language of a growing nation. No language is ever dead which is the vehicle of a great world-literature. Latin and Greek are dead languages only to "dead ones."

Again, his argument falsely implies that students of language are especially given to memorizing for "marks," and that they "learn only to forget." But these tendencies are just as prevalent in most other subjects. Any study must be continued beyond the college if a knowledge of it is to be retained. From this standpoint, one subject is about as unpractical as another. Perhaps students of some of the social sciences do not "learn to forget," because too often the knowledge gained is so vague and confused that the term "remember" can hardly be used of it.

Our economist states the principle that "he who spends his time doing that which is worth relatively less to him and society than that which he might be doing is wasting his time and energy." But then, with no data but his own oracular assertion, he declares that, therefore, classical studies are a criminal waste! But let us observe how he arrives at his dogmatic conclusion. It is through a series of fallacies.

In accord with the purblind vision of many Americans today, he would apparently limit education to the affairs of the present. He

writes jauntily: "For a man to know himself, it were better to begin with his own present person and times than with Adam or Aphrodite." But, we would ask, is this the current method in most of the staple courses of study? Does not the professor of philosophy first create an atmosphere for philosophy and give historic perspective by dealing with the progress of philosophy to date? Are not his courses in the modern philosophers rather his advanced courses? Is it not generally understood that the proper place to begin the study of history is not with the nineteenth century or contemporary times, but with the ancient or mediaeval period, since thus alone can a true appreciation of the modern period be gained? Does the study of English literature usually begin with the great nineteenth-century poets, or, still worse, with contemporary American poetry and novels? Is it not rather the custom to offer first a historical course in the introduction to English literature? Does the biologist begin his study with man? Does he not begin with vegetable ooze or bugs or frogs? Will even an economist dare to condemn such a procedure in biology as an enormous waste? What, by the way, is our economist's own method in teaching economics? We hope he does not face the Freshmen with the present problems of industry, money, transportation, and labor before he has tried to ground them in some fundamental economic principles, and in the industrial history, at least, of his own country. The opposite procedure is, indeed, all too common, and is largely to blame for the half-baked economic and sociological theories that are so prevalent today.

It is indeed surprising that an economist, who should be something of a specialist in history, appears so lacking in historic perspective. In the conceit of the immediate present we are too prone to forget the fundamental fact that all life roots in the past. Every existing institution has been conditioned in its development, not only by the immediate need, but also by the institutions that preceded it, and it can best be understood through them. The heritage of the past bulks so large in the life of today, and is so intimately bound up with it, that the doctrine of the short cut to power, advocated with such assurance by our economist, is palpably absurd. It is still true, as in Plato's day, that the "longer

road" in education is the shortest way home, for all who have the ability and ambition to travel it.

Again, our economist advances the cheap sophism that so often passes for wisdom concerning the so-called "practical." "What is the sense," he urges, "of doing any work, or partially acquiring any part of a language or science, which ten chances to one will not be used again, when the time and energy could be employed in acquiring knowledge which would be of constant value in meeting the daily moral, political, economic, physiological, and social problems of life, and give just as much real discipline in addition?" Of course, mark you, the knowledge that is alone distinctly worth while is the economic and sociological. Here is where you get your ready-made knowledge, which you can apply directly to life and make its problem easy. But what means this fine-sounding question when reduced to its lowest terms? It is the old Mammon of the "bread-and-butter" practical, dressed up to deceive. It begs two questions: whether a student does gain as much discipline from gorging himself with the social sciences, at the expense of the other fundamental subjects of the curriculum, and whether these studies are necessarily any more practical, even using the term in his sense of direct utility, than are mathematics, the sciences, languages, and literatures. Let us not fail to recognize the drift of this fallacy about the "practical" in education. First such a claim was made for the sciences as against the classics, later the shift was made to the modern languages, but now, in our economist's argument, science, mathematics, language, and literature alike are to be placed in the same back-number catalogue with Greek and Latin. The social sciences contain the last word of what is practical for life. But the economist cannot stop here. His practical, defined as the immediate utility, would logically shut out all the more thorough discipline of the social sciences too. If men and women are to study in school or college only what they are to use directly in life, then the curriculum must become poverty-stricken indeed. For the average person, reading, writing, spelling, and the simpler operations in arithmetic would be sufficient. By this same process of reasoning, Shakespeare and Milton would be ruled out, as well as Homer and Vergil, German and French, for

the most part, as well as the classics; pure mathematics, pure science, most of history, philosophy, and many of our economist's own courses would have to be cast to the scrap heap. From such a Philistine revolt, good Lord, deliver us!

It is, after all, the indirect utility of all these lines of study, the social sciences included, that gives them their chief value. It is the fact that they enrich life with a higher and broader culture, that they help to make a man bigger than his profession, his vocation, or his business, that causes them to be most worth while. It is still the truth, despite the crass utilitarianism preached by this prophet of the practical, that the true utility is that which loses itself in the eternities.

But since our economist so insists on the practical, let him seek his data from the deans of the leading technical and professional schools of the country. He will find that the majority will answer, "We prefer men who have received a broad and thorough training in the older fundamentals of education. Other things being equal, such men soon outstrip the merely practical men in our schools, as also in their profession later." On the other hand, if he will investigate the secret of the prevalent criticism against college training today, he will find that much of the criticism is based on the fact that the college curriculum is fast becoming a hodgepodge of everything, from courses on country life and house decoration to folk-dancing, and that all are being considered of the same educational value, so that college training is in danger of losing all definiteness of purpose or aim.

Our critic proceeds to apply his doctrine of the practical and the short cut to the study of English. He says: "To most students, the motto, improve your English via Latin and Greek, should be supplanted by the motto, improve your English via English, and acquire what Latin or Greek you need, as the need for it presents itself in the study of English." We may pass by the suggestion that one may learn enough Latin and Greek to be of service to him for English in some summer vacation as merely another evidence of his ignorance of these languages. But let us test his doctrine by its results. During the past decade or two, the vast majority of students, at least in the West, have been following his advice.

In so far as they have learned any English, they have learned it via English. No commentary on the results is needed to anyone who has had experience with Freshman themes, or indeed with the written English of the average college student. We need not ask how their English would compare with that of the boys in the classical schools of England. Moreover, our economist admits that "probably 90 per cent of liberal-arts students leave college without ability to read or write any foreign language with ease or fluency—to say *nothing of their own*." But, be it remembered that this 90 per cent has had "little Latin and less Greek," and their English is wretched in spite of their freedom from the classical incubus! The mere fact that at least 60 per cent of our everyday English is of Latin derivation is enough to reveal the folly of the economist's advice. We can add our testimony to that of thousands of others, that our most effective and most abiding lessons in English were learned from our study of Latin.

The sophistry of this critic of the classics, however, does not end here. Like some Polonius, he is ready with another fine maxim. "The object of education is not to learn several ways of expressing the same idea, but many ideas regarding ourselves and our environment, expressed in one way, or at least in the most economical and effective way." We have seen above that his one most "effective way" is not to be realized by his method, if we are to judge by its concrete results. But, indeed, this sentence reveals his utter failure to grasp the meaning of language-study. Are these two objects, which he tries to set in antithesis, so mutually exclusive? Does not education consist both in gaining many ideas and in learning to express them effectively in several ways? Is it not more desirable to be an Athenian in language than a poverty-stricken Spartan? In any event, does the proper study of language, native or foreign, exclude the study of ideas? To ask these questions is only to answer them. Language and thought are one and indivisible. The language of Plato and Sophocles and Thucydides and Vergil and Cicero cannot be taught without teaching their ideas, and their ideas cannot be properly grasped without a knowledge of their language. If anyone doubts this, let him read some of the numerous absurd interpretations of Plato by his non-classical critics.

Moreover, one who knows one language besides his own understands well the utter impossibility of translating the rhythm, artistic quality, emphasis, and peculiar emotional standpoint of a great poet into another tongue.

It is just at this point that the critic of language-study is especially blind. He fails to see that each new language acquired is a new window upon life, for the language of a people is a concrete record of its psychological history and its peculiar standpoint in relation to the world. Only by learning the language of a people can we see life through their eyes. There is therefore nothing better able to melt away our petty prejudices, provincialisms, and dogmatisms than the ability to read the literature of several great nations in their own tongue. In addition, the study of the classical languages, in particular, is well worth while because of the recognized peculiar perfection of each, though it is a casting of pearls to try to prove this to a Philistine who probably knows little of either.

The methods of language-teachers are doubtless often at fault and open to criticism, but the whole campaign against the study of language is irrational, and proceeds from ignorance. Language is one of the most important products of the human spirit. The study of words is the art of getting at the very heart of a people. Such a study is surely, to say the least, as well worth while as the practical(?) courses in corporations, business management, and banking, by professors who have never had any first-hand business experience, or as courses in the study of bugs or frogs. Yet, insists our objector, "Truth, justice, facts, logic, scientific accuracy, and analysis, not rhetoric and linguistic window-dressing, are the hope of freedom." Yes, such was also Plato's contention, but the bulk of such cheap rhetoric and sophistry comes not from men classically educated, but from those who have been trained by the short-cut method.

An excellent example of such sophistry is our economist's arbitrary insistence that linguistic study must be limited to a mere grammatical grind. He declares that "the language-teacher who pretends to justify extensive requirements in language, because of professional excursions into science or philosophy, better taught

by specialists in those fields," is either blind or dishonest. He first decides offhand that grammatical study is not worth while, and then defines the study of language so that it can include nothing else. Will our critic kindly inform us how we are to teach Plato's *Republic*, for example, without making constant excursions into philosophy, politics, economics, and education? It is, indeed, fortunate that he did not become a language-teacher, and especially that we are not obliged to follow his dictum as to the function of language-teaching in the schools. As we have seen, the study of language involves necessarily the study of ideas. Classical studies involve not merely the languages, but also all the richness of culture, the art, the literary power and beauty, the breadth of thought, the splendid imagination, the insight into ancient life and institutions, which a knowledge of the languages alone unlocks. It would be no whit less arbitrary and superficial to define history as a mere disorganized body of details about battles, the names of kings, and dates, and then to condemn it as an educational waste, than the procedure of our critic of the classics.

Our economist's closing words are: "What should be done with those college professors who are wasting human energy, life, and capital by misdirecting students and by misrepresenting the relative values of studies?" We might well set over against this question another: What shall be done with those college professors who, in the name of a false practical, write high-sounding sophistries about "what is useful," and who sit in oracular judgment upon subjects about which they apparently know nothing, so as to deceive the very elect? A late eminent philosopher was accustomed to apply a passage of scripture, Gen. 2:25, to those men who, though devoid of training in philosophy or theology, persisted in setting forth dogmatic opinions on these subjects. The same passage might well be suggested as applicable to some of the anti-classicists today, in whose case, in view of their lack of actual knowledge of the subject against which they inveigh, a discreet silence would have been more fitting.